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FM AMEMBASSY VILNIUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1078
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VILNIUS 000167

SIPDIS

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FOR EUR/NB AND EUR/OHI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/08/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [LH](#)

SUBJECT: SNIPIKES CEMETERY UPDATE: NEW DIGGING CAUSES
UPROAR

REF: 06 VILNIUS 985 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Rebecca Dunham for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The sudden appearance of heavy machinery and a large new hole in the area of a former Jewish cemetery burst into the media the week of March 5. The media attention to a scuffle involving a local rabbi may turn out to be a silver lining to an otherwise terrible incident: other members of the diplomatic community may finally engage on the issue, and the GOL finally convened its cemetery working group. The GOL plans to proceed with small-scale archeological digs on the site to ascertain cemetery boundaries, but regrettably is not involving international experts at this time. End Summary.

Background on recent digging

¶2. (C) The Ambassador and emboffs explored the grounds of the Sporto Rumai on the site of a former Jewish cemetery in the Snipiskes (shnip-ISH-kis) neighborhood of Vilnius on March 6.

To our surprise, we found a large, new excavation adjacent to the Mindaugas apartment complex. If the maps that the Lithuanian government has previously provided are accurate, then the hole (like the existing apartments) is outside of the boundaries of the former cemetery. Nevertheless, Post was previously unaware of any plans for a second building.

Local Rabbi injured by door

¶3. (C) We received a call from Chaim Bershtein, the Chief Rabbi of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, on March 7, following his visit to the site. He initially claimed that "the bones of (his) ancestors" were being desecrated, but backed away from this allegation when pol/econoff said she had been to the site the previous day, and had seen no evidence of bones. He also alleged that he had been "attacked" by the site's security guard. When asked for more information, he said he had been struck in the head by the gate of the construction site fence opened by the guard.

Working Group Update

¶4. (U) We met with Vice-Minister of Culture and head of the PM's Snipiskes working group, Gintaras Sodeika, together with Albinas Kuncevicius and Algimantas Degutis, Director and Deputy Director of the MoC's Cultural Heritage department, respectively, on March 7. They showed us a binder full of the original plans for the Mindaugas apartments, including architectural drawings and permits. The new digging is a part of those plans; a four-story building will be erected in the footprint of the excavation. All of this was approved in

2004-2005 along with the now-finished and partially occupied first building.

15. (C) Our GOL interlocutors also updated us on the work done to date by the Prime Minister's working group on the Snipiskes cemetery. The group had not met since September, but most of the archival work had been done. The Lithuanian History Institute had not, however, completed its examination of maps of the site. The working group would hold an emergency session on March 8, they told us, in part because of the uproar that had been raised following Rabbi Burshtein's visit and resulting injury. (Engineers and architects involved in the building project held a press conference on March 7 in which they asserted that the construction site was not on the site of the former cemetery. We also understand that news of Burshtein's injury made it into the Israeli press.)

16. (C) Vice Minister Sodeika repeatedly expressed the GOL's desire to be open in its research of the site. He described some small-scale archaeological digs that were planned for the area. We pressed him to include international experts in this. Initially, our interlocutors replied that they felt they had the competence to do this alone. We were candid with them about the lack of trust that exists regarding Snipiskes; if Lithuania does not involve international experts early, the working group's findings might not be believed.

17. (C) The working group met on March 8. Jolanda Kriskovicene, the group's MFA representative, told us that the group decided to recommend that the Government request that the Vilnius municipal government suspend any construction activities at the Mindaugas Apartments site

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until the History Institute completes its ongoing study. It is unclear to us at this time whether the government can force the construction to stop, or merely ask.

18. (C) Simonas Gurevicius, Executive Director of the Lithuanian Jewish Community (LJC), also was at the meeting. He told us that the group decided not to include outside experts in their research now. Instead, they will draw their conclusions, but label them as only "preliminary." These will then be shared with outside experts for comment. Gurevicius told us later on March 9 that the LJC issued a statement to the press calling for a moratorium on building on the site and the establishment of an international commission to determine the cemetery's true location.

Comment

19. (C) The media storm and the anger of the local Jewish community over the events of this week has led other members of the diplomatic community -- including the British and Israeli Ambassadors -- to indicate to us that they will engage on the Snipiskes issue. We will also continue to press the GOL -- at both the working and political levels -- to include international experts in their research as a way to ensure buy-in later.
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